

Revolutionary Subjectivity 'Proper' and the Revolutionary Conquest of the Political Power of the State

We have seen in the previous chapter that Marx's dialectical exposition in *Capital* culminates with the 'expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people',²⁶ a process which he identifies as immediately coinciding with the 'point at which they [the centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour] become incompatible with the capitalist integument', which therefore 'is burst asunder'.²⁷ I have already mentioned that this concise statement about the revolutionary transcendence of capital is rather problematic. The reason for this is that it conflates two qualitatively different determinations of the 'Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation': the expropriation (hence abolition) of the bourgeoisie or capitalist class and the abolition of capital itself as a materialised social relation.

Yet this conflation between those two distinct (yet related) social processes lies at the basis of the traditional or orthodox Marxist conception of revolutionary subjectivity and the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. This conception actually follows from the ideological representation of the social relations of production as juridical property relations. In effect, socialism was seen as complete state ownership of the means of production by a workers' state. The proletarian conquest of state power alongside the expropriation of the bourgeoisie was accordingly represented as synonymous with the transcendence of the capitalist mode of production.²⁸ As should be evident from

26 Marx 1976g, p. 930.

27 Marx 1976g, p. 929.

28 See Chattopadhyay 1992, 1996 and 2010, for textual evidence of this conception of socialism in Soviet Marxism. In other words, socialism was seen as a *transitional society* between capitalism and communism. This distinction was usually legitimised with reference to Marx's discussion of a lower and higher phase of the society that supersedes the capitalist mode of production in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Marx 1989a). However, as Chattopadhyay demonstrates in the works just cited, the orthodox Marxist differentiation between a socialist and communist society represents a misreading of Marx's argument in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which referred to two phases *within* the communist association of individuals, interchangeably referred to as Communism and Socialism. Incidentally, this misreading is not exclusively a Soviet or orthodox Marxist feature. For instance, despite Camatte's otherwise radically unorthodox reading of Marx, in *Capital and Community*, he mistakenly posits the dictatorship of the proletariat as one of the *three* successive *post-capitalist* phases (the other two being 'lower socialism' and 'communism', as in the Leninist reading of Marx's discussion in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*). See Camatte 1988, pp. 121–3, 139.

my critical reading of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, this conception of the over-coming of capitalism substantially differs from Marx's views.

Thus, whatever the ambiguities of Marx's formulation in the passage from the chapter on the 'Historical Tendency of Capital Accumulation' referred to above, a cursory reading of his so-called 'political writings' makes evident that he was very clear about the '*unity-in-difference*' between the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the abolition of capital. To begin with, this is condensed in the political programme of the working class to be implemented through the revolutionary 'conquest of political supremacy' contained in the *Communist Manifesto*, whose *immediate* economic content unequivocally comes down to the absolute centralisation of capital in the form of state-property – hence the abolition of the bourgeoisie – and does not involve the abolition of the capitalist mode of production.²⁹ As Chattopadhyay competently shows,³⁰ for Marx the revolutionary conquest of political power together with the expropriation of the bourgeoisie were the *necessary forms* in which to *start* the process of transformation of the capitalist mode of production into the free association of individuals. But unlike the conception found in Lenin and orthodox Marxism in general, Marx was very clear that the political rule of the working class 'does not by itself signify the collective *appropriation by society*, and does not indicate the end of *capital*'.³¹ The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was, for Marx, a *period within the capitalist mode of production* – hence, not a non-capitalist transitional *society* – in which the latter was to be entirely revolutionised in every nook and cranny up to the point of fully preparing wage workers for their self-emancipation – hence for their self-abolition as working class.³² This has several implications beyond those discussed in Chattopadhyay's rigorous but mainly exegetical commentary.

First, during that period, workers continue to be wage labourers. The sale of labour power as a commodity to a single state-owned capital for a wage continues to be the general *indirect* social relation regulating the establishment of the unity between production and individual consumption (and hence mediating the reproduction of the worker's life). In this sense, material reproduction as a whole is not *fully* socialised under those circumstances. Although the allocation of the total labour power of society in its different concrete

29 Marx and Engels 1976b, pp. 504–5. Strictly speaking, Marx and Engels's programme is even more timid. They suggest the *gradual* expropriation of the bourgeoisie, which would eventually lead to the absolute centralisation of capital as state property.

30 Chattopadhyay 1992, pp. 92–3.

31 Chattopadhyay 1992, p. 93.

32 Ibid.

forms is no longer privately organised in formally independent direct production processes, the part of the total product of social labour that corresponds to the reproduction of labour power still takes the commodity/value form.³³ Consequently, the process of metabolism does not attain social unity in a completely direct form and the social character of labour therefore continues to take the form of capital, i.e. of an objectified social power that dominates the direct producers. In effect, as with simple co-operation, the constitution of an immediately collective productive body is not yet the direct product of the fully self-conscious association of the producers, but is set into motion with the previous mediation of the sale of their labour power as private and independent individuals to the single state-owned capital. Therefore, whilst this figure of the collective worker now personifies the direct organisation of all the functions of the immediate production process in its totality, 'their co-operation only begins with the labour process, but by then they have ceased to belong to themselves'.³⁴ Their labour belongs to the total social capital, which now immediately exists as a singular capital that subsumes the co-operation of the collective labourer as a whole. In other words, in the reified form of money-as-capital, the materialised general social relation of workers still *pre-exists* and *autonomously sets into motion* their productive co-operation with the only alienated purpose of expanding its own magnitude, i.e. of producing surplus value.

In the second place, no matter how radically democratic is the self-government of the direct producers during the dictatorship of the proletariat (and Marx thought it would be),³⁵ they still confront the social determinations of their individual life activity as an alienated power.³⁶ Similarly to workers' co-operatives within an individual private fragment of social labour, general political self-government by wage labourers is tantamount to the self-management 'of the use of the means of production to *valorize their own labour*'³⁷ for the total social capital. That wage workers have dispensed with the mediation of the direct relation established with a capitalist or a state bureaucrat in the labour process does not change the fact that they are self-organising the *alienated objectification of their productive activity*. Certainly, they no longer submit their productive subjectivity to the consciousness and will of another person (or rather, personification). But they still have to submit their conscious action

33 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 38.

34 Marx 1976g, p. 451.

35 See Draper 1974, for a textual analysis of this point.

36 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 26.

37 Marx 1991, p. 571, my emphasis.

to the unity of society existing in the form of a self-activating objective process that they do not control in a fully conscious manner. The despotism and coercion of the production process of human life determined as material bearer of capital's valorisation process does not disappear. It only takes the concrete form of a democratically self-imposed compulsion – yet one that is objectively determined behind their backs – to expand the materialised social relation.³⁸ In other words, even if, for the sake of argument, we assume with Marx that the *Commune* was 'the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour';³⁹ this communal *political* organisation still represents, *pace* Lebowitz,⁴⁰ a form of existence of the *capitalist state* and not a 'workers' state'.⁴¹ The form determination of the state is to be the political mode of existence of the movement of the total social capital, i.e. the objectified embodiment of the direct organisation of the unity of the conditions of social reproduction in its alienated capital form. Neither the fact that this general political representation comes to be personified by the rule of wage workers as a class, nor the radically democratic character of its institutional or organisational structure transform this content of the state, the basis of which lies in the economic mediation of the unity of social labour through the commodity, money and capital forms. Yet I shall argue below that *precisely by virtue of this content of the state* the working class can achieve its self-abolition (and hence the abolition of both capital and the state) only through the 'conquest of political supremacy'.

Thirdly, this means that, although taking place in the form of a revolution, the political action of the working class that conquers state power and expro-

38 To make the point as clear as possible, it might be the coercion emanating from a democratically reached consensus in a universal assembly which, as long as its individual members continue to see themselves as private and independent, will still confront their species-powers as an external force, a 'general will' to which she/he must submit her/his activity. Thus, she/he will experience the mandates generated in the assembly (including attendance to the assembly itself) as an obligation, moral or legally sanctioned (even if she/he participated in the 'decision making' process). Only when the human being *objectively and fully consciously* recognises the social determinations of her/his individuality, in communism, will the unity of society cease to appear as an alien force that dominates the individual.

39 Marx 1986, p. 334.

40 Lebowitz 2003, pp. 189–96; 2009, Chapter 18.

41 I say 'for the sake of argument' because, in my view, in those sorts of grandiose statements Marx 'the militant' got carried away and came dangerously close to offering 'recipes for the cook-shops of the future'. A similar point could be made about many of Marx's arguments in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

priates the bourgeoisie cannot be the product of a fully self-conscious subjectivity. Otherwise it would not continue to see the social determinations of human individuality as external to the latter and hence as objectively borne by the product of labour. It is not only an alienated action, but also one that is still unaware of its own alienated nature as the personification of the movement of the total social capital. In other words, the immanent content, which determines this action, still operates behind the backs of workers, who still see their political activity as an affirmation of their abstractly free subjectivity. By 'getting rid of the bosses', they now attain full *personal* 'self-determination' as *collective commodity producers and owners*, overcoming both the relative mutilation that their personally free productive consciousness experienced by virtue of the mediation of the figure of the capitalist in the direct process of production (and, one could add at this stage, in circulation); and, again assuming with Marx the 'Commune form' taken by the dictatorship of the proletariat, also that of 'state parasites, richly paid sycophants and sinecurists' in the general political representation of the unity of the total social capital. Nevertheless, the content and result of this political action is not the self-abolition of the working class, but rather its reproduction, hence that of the valorisation of capital.⁴² The dictatorship of the proletariat represents the plenitude of the affirmation of the specific productive powers of the doubly free worker and, for this reason, it also constitutes the plenitude of her/his alienation: under these circumstances, the separation and alienation of the labourer from the means of production does not even need the mediation of the private property of the non-labourer.⁴³

In this sense, the form of political subjectivity that undertakes the revolutionary expropriation of the bourgeoisie by conquering state power is *not* the one that expresses the historical necessity for the self-conscious transcendence of capitalist production and whose determinations have been the main focal points of this book's investigation. In other words, it is not *revolutionary subjectivity 'proper'*. It is only the expression of the clash of the production of relative surplus value with the mediation of private property, i.e. of the need for capital, as a moment of its own expanded reproduction, to take the form of a directly collective property, the immediate 'form of social capital (capital of directly associated individuals) in contrast to private capital'.⁴⁴ Even more so than the joint-stock companies mentioned by Marx in Volume III of *Capital*,

42 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 37.

43 Ibid.

44 Marx 1991, p. 567.

'this is the abolition of capital as private property within the confines of the capitalist mode of production itself'.⁴⁵

In the first place, this politically enforced unification of the 'entire social capital as one single capitalist company' under state ownership is the necessary form in which the production of relative surplus value drives the alienated socialisation of personally free labour to its limits *within the capitalist mode of production*, i.e. it is the necessary mode of motion of the *absolute centralisation of capital*. But secondly, it is the form in which the total social capital gets rid of the figure of the capitalist when the very material conditions of production (and circulation) make her/him superfluous for the valorisation process. In effect, the complexity and scale of the co-operation of the collective worker of large-scale industry render the subjective powers of the capitalist incapable of personifying in the name of her/his capital even the unproductive labour of superintendence of the productive organs of the former.⁴⁶ Thus, as the separation of active function in the reproduction process from capital ownership reaches completion, its existence becomes a barrier to the accumulation of capital itself. The parasitic nature of the capitalist, though not yet of capital, thereby becomes materially concrete.⁴⁷ And note that this expresses an alienated necessity of the accumulation of the total social capital: the consumption of the capitalist represents a deduction of the potential surplus value that could be devoted to its self-expansion.

Yet given that the centralisation of capital is the most potent form for the production of relative surplus value and, *a fortiori*, for the alienated historical movement toward the constitution of directly socialised universal productive subjects, the conquest of political supremacy and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie become 'a necessary point of transition towards the transformation of capital back into the property of the producers' and 'towards the transformation of all functions formerly bound up with capital ownership in the reproduction process into simple functions of the associated producers, into social

45 Ibid.

46 As Marx himself notes (1976g, p. 549; 1991, pp. 510–11), with large-scale industry all the functions of supervision, coercion and management come to be personified by a partial organ of the collective labourer.

47 Incidentally, the confusion over the parasitic nature of the capitalist and that of the capital form as such underlies Negri's views of the present, 'Postfordist' forms of human co-operation as carrying in their immediacy – that is, without the mediation of additional material transformations – the potentiality to explode the capital relation. See Negri 1992, pp. 65–8; Negri and Guattari 1999, pp. 156–60.

functions'.⁴⁸ In this sense, the 'ultra-leftist' political programme for 'immediate communisation' is, broadly speaking, right *as far as the content of the political action of the fully developed, self-conscious revolutionary subject is concerned*.⁴⁹ It is wrong to think that such a form of subjectivity can emerge in the course of history without passing 'through long struggles, through a series of historic processes transforming circumstances and men',⁵⁰ and which can only come about as the result of the 'conquest of political supremacy' that undertakes the absolute centralisation of capital.⁵¹

48 Marx 1991, p. 568.

49 See *Théorie Communiste* 2003; *Aufheben* 2003 and 2004; Endnotes 2008b and 2008a. A useful critical assessment and discussion of this political milieu can be found in the recent collection of essays edited by Noys (2011).

50 Marx 1986, p. 335.

51 The problem with the traditional view on the historical production of communism is not, as the aforementioned ultra-leftist milieu would have it, that it postulated the need for the mediation of the dictatorship of the proletariat (cf. Endnotes 2008b, p. 13). As argued above, the problem is that it conceived of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a *post-capitalist transitional society*, whereas my claim is that it is a necessary form taken by the development of the capitalist mode of production, and which is presupposed by the constitution of revolutionary subjectivity 'proper'. At least formally, one could argue that *Théorie Communiste's* version of the 'communisation' thesis does acknowledge the need for historical mediations in the becoming of revolutionary subjectivity. Thus, they attribute a historical role to what they call the 'programmatisation' of the 'old workers' movement' in the development of the capital relation up to the point at which it can be immediately abolished (*Théorie Communiste* 2008, pp. 155–66). Unlike the views of those associated with the *Troploin* journal (Dauvé 2008; Dauvé and Nesic 2008), they consider that the determination of the supersession of capital as the immediate content of the proletarian struggle is a *result* of the historical development of the capitalist class relation and not its 'invariant' character (a 'produced overcoming'; see Endnotes 2008a, pp. 215–16). However, in their idiosyncratic account of the history of the capital relation, so-called 'programmatisation' is said to have exhausted its historical *raison d'être* in the development of the revolutionary working class *without* having actualised its full potentiality through the absolute centralisation of the total social capital on a world scale. From the perspective adopted in this book, such a situation is quite simply an oxymoron; the kind of subjectivity that immediately personifies the fully self-conscious abolition of the capital form through the revolutionary production of the communist association of individuals (i.e. revolutionary subjectivity 'proper') cannot skip over the necessary mediation of the *actual historical realisation* of the absolute centralisation of capital in the political form of the global dictatorship of the proletariat. At bottom, the more general underlying weakness of the approach of collectives such as *Théorie Communiste* and *Endnotes* (of which their unconvincing historical narrative is a concrete expression) is that despite their own claims to the contrary (Endnotes 2008a, p. 215), they fail to supersede the dualism between

This need to 'take power' is not simply grounded in strategic considerations, insofar as historical experience shows that refusal to take state power has only resulted in those aiming at revolutionary change being eventually thrashed by it.⁵² Nor is it the way in which the workers can freely 'realize their own need for self-development'⁵³ by gradually depriving capital 'of its greatest weapon – the dependence of wage-labourers upon it for employment and for the ability to satisfy their requirements'.⁵⁴ Instead, it is grounded in the alienated nature of the workers' subjectivity and, therefore, in the alienated forms necessarily taken by its development and transformation.

As I argued in Chapter 6, the inverted character of capital-determined social existence implies that the subjectivity of commodity owners 'changes skin' only as the necessary mediation of the autonomised self-movement of forms of objectivity. Thus, workers cannot freely self-transform their form of subjectivity in order to develop a revolutionary political consciousness. Insofar as the latter is but an expression of the workers' *productive* subjectivity, the only way of unfolding the necessary underlying transformation of the production process is to 'force capital' to develop that specific revolution in the material conditions of social labour through the production of relative surplus value. As we have seen, workers can obviously not do this by turning their back on their objectified general social relation and its economic and political forms (i.e. capital and the state).⁵⁵ There is no exteriority to their

objectivism and subjectivism. Thus, revolutionary action is not seen as an alienated action that personifies a necessity of the accumulation of the total social capital. Instead, it is ultimately conceived of as abstractly self-moving, yet 'conditioned' or 'shaped' by the historically changing objective configuration of the subsumption of labour to capital. In turn, the latter is idiosyncratically characterised in terms of 'the degree of integration of the circuits of reproduction of capital and labour-power' (Endnotes 2008a, p. 212) and not on the basis of the qualitative determinations of the productive subjectivity of the collective labourer.

52 Bensaïd 2005, p. 179.

53 Lebowitz 2003, p. 190.

54 Lebowitz 2003, p. 192.

55 See Holloway 2002b. Holloway's argument for the refusal to take political power is that the state is a form of existence of capital and that 'its own continued existence is tied to the reproduction of capitalist social relations as a whole'. This might be the case, but so is the very subjectivity of wage labourers. Would that mean that workers should refrain from acting politically in any form because they are a mode of existence of capital? Clearly, this is not Holloway's conclusion. The 'trick', as I have already argued, is that Holloway eventually glorifies a residual or pristine element of the worker's subjectivity, which remains external to capital.

determination as 'executors' of the alienated movement of their social being (the accumulation of the total social capital). On the contrary, they have to act upon it in order to make it reach its absolute limit as an alienated mode of development of productive subjectivity. And this can only come about through the absolute centralisation of the entire social capital as the property of a world state.⁵⁶ Only in this way can workers impel capital to unleash 'the historic processes transforming circumstances and men'⁵⁷ in the forms needed by their constitution as alienated yet fully conscious revolutionary subjects. As such bearers of revolutionary subjectivity 'proper', workers shall eventually become aware of their world-historic, truly emancipatory task: consigning capital-determined alienation to the dustbin of (pre)history through the production of the conscious association of the fully developed social individuals.⁵⁸

Final Words: Whose Revolutionary Action is It Anyway?

The reader might be tempted to grasp what I have been doing in this book as an exercise in 'Marxology', yet another *interpretation* of the works of Karl Marx. However, the very form of the dialectical method as discussed in this work already provides us with a first reason as to why it should not be seen as an 'interpretation of texts'.⁵⁹ As argued above, the point of departure of any materialist dialectical investigation must be the conscious organisation of the form to be given to *our* transformative action in order to realise with the latter the potentialities existing in our reality (the here and now) to 'change the world'. That is why I have been referring to this book as a *critical reading* of Marx's work, a necessary moment of the broader question of the positive development of the critique of political economy, which in turn is but the conscious organisation of the practical abolition of capital.

56 Iñigo Carrera 2008, pp. 37, 124.

57 Marx 1986, p. 335.

58 Note that the distinction between the absolute centralisation of capital through the conquest of political supremacy and the revolutionary abolition of the capital form is essentially analytic. It refers to two necessary *qualitative* 'moments' of the transcendence of the capitalist mode of production into the free association of individuals or communism. Whether they will crystallise as two neatly defined historical periods, or as phases of a single historical process, is something that cannot be said today without, again, relapsing into providing 'recipes for the cook-shops of the future'.

59 Iñigo Carrera 2008, p. 317.

In this sense, what should interest the contemporary reader of Marx's works is not 'what he really said', but rather the development of the objective knowledge of the social determinations of *contemporary* social forms of existence of capital and, fundamentally, of *our* political action among its concrete forms. As argued earlier, this process cannot be spared from the development of the laborious analytical journey from the concrete to the abstract, and the subsequent synthetic return from the abstract to the concrete. In this endeavour, the reading of Marx's works, i.e. of socially pre-existing objectifications of dialectical knowledge, can only serve to *enhance* the potency of our process of cognition. In effect, inasmuch as it is an original development from the *individual* point of view but a process of *re-cognition* as far as its *social* character is concerned, we can engage in the inquiry with the advantage of being able to individually appropriate already existing social powers of the 'general intellect', thereby giving our own process of self-knowledge increased agility and efficiency ('real economy of time', as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*).⁶⁰

On the other hand, this necessity to *re-cognise* all the mediations involved in the forms of present-day social being is what gives the very form of dialectical cognition an intrinsically *self-critical* quality. Thus, in my presentation of the different forms of capital as the alienated subject of modern social life through the reconstruction of Marx's texts, I was both following the immanent necessity of those forms *and*, in the very same movement, providing a critique of Marx's own discoveries. As we have seen, one of the critical results of this investigation has been the awareness of the incompleteness of the unfolding of the determinations of revolutionary subjectivity in *Capital*. A huge gap exists between Marx's exposition of the transformations of the *materiality* of the productive subjectivity of the collective labourer and the *politically* revolutionary subjectivity outlined in the end of Volume I of that work. Although I argued that the core elements for such a systematic dialectical presentation of the social necessity of revolutionary subjectivity could be found in the *Grundrisse*, it was necessary to put together those pieces – scattered in an unpublished manuscript – and integrate them as necessary mediations into the reproduction in thought of the qualitative determinations of the real subsumption of labour to capital.

Furthermore, in this concluding chapter I tried to go beyond Marx in the specification of the determinations of the revolutionary subject. I essentially did this by explicitly addressing aspects of revolutionary subjectivity that, I think, are only implicit in Marx's work (although they certainly *are* there):

60 Iñigo Carrera 2008, pp. 317–18.

namely, its alienated nature; its being a concrete expression of the historical transformations of productive subjectivity; the specific form of its essentially scientific character (hence the historicity of scientific method); and finally, the *materiality* of its organisational form (the overcoming of the separation between 'conception' and 'execution' in the political action of the working class).

And yet, even if including more concrete mediations than Marx, this book evidently still remained at a considerably high level of abstraction. As much as Marx himself, I also considered 'bourgeois society in the long view and as a whole'.⁶¹ That is, with the exception of some digressions in passing, I only addressed the *essential determination* and *general tendency* behind revolutionary subjectivity, with no attention to the concrete forms in which the latter unfolds in the course of the history of capitalist development and, more importantly, in the *contemporary* forms of the essentially global accumulation of capital. On the other hand, I believe that the approach presented here does provide us with the key to such an investigation, namely, the movement of the twofold contradiction between universality and particularity, and between the expansion and degradation of the productive subjectivity of the different organs of the collective labourer, as it springs from the production of relative surplus value.⁶²

As a necessary moment of the class struggle, a most urgent task arises for that partial organ of the collective labourer that is nowadays responsible for the production of the critical scientific knowledge of capitalist social forms (i.e. communist intellectual labourers). What is required is dialectical research on contemporary concrete forms in which the alienated development of the productive subjectivity of the workers towards its fully developed universality realises itself through its own negation, that is, by fragmenting the different partial organs of the collective labourer and by keeping the productive attributes of the labourers (even when they are expanded as in the case of intellectual labourers) miserably bound to being those required by the material forms of the production of relative surplus value.

Needless to say, and at this stage of our investigation this might sound redundant, this does not entail an abstractly theoretical interest, but is the

61 Marx 1993, p. 712.

62 See Iñigo Carrera 2008, Chapter 2; Grinberg and Starosta 2009 and 2014; Starosta 2010, for more concrete discussions of the contemporary configuration of the global economy based on the approach that informs this book. Charnock, Purcell and Ribera-Fumaz (2014) also draw some of the implications of this perspective for the investigation of crisis-ridden dynamics of capital accumulation in Spain.

necessary method for discovering the form of political action that could mediate the immediate needs of workers with the 'historical interests of the proletariat as a whole', i.e. the development of the productive subjectivity of the global collective worker beyond its alienated capitalist form.